

Poring over the details

Fiona O'Shaughnessy plays the anti-hero of the cult TV show *Utopia*. Is she anything like as enigmatic as her character Jessica Hyde, asks Kate Butler

Fiona O'Shaughnessy had made up her mind: no more film, no more television. The stage was where the Galwegian actress was most comfortable. She told her agent she was going to focus on theatre. Within days of the diktat, however, her agent, perhaps unused to the new regime, sent her a script for a television series called *Utopia*.

"I was like, 'Great, I'm not going to get that. I love it. Damn,'" she says. "I rang up my brother Pat and told him there was going to be this series on television next year. 'It's right up your street, you're going to love it, I have a flippin' audition for it.' He was like, 'Why don't you go in and be a bit more positive?'"

In the opening episode of *Utopia*'s first season, which aired on Channel 4 in January 2013, two malevolent henchmen cut a violent swathe through the lives of ordinary folk. They are looking for two things: a cult comic-book manuscript called *The Utopia Experiments*, and a particular woman. At regular intervals, and with increased intensity, they demand to know: "Where is Jessica Hyde?" At the end of the episode, there is a knock on the door: it's O'Shaughnessy. She says: "Hello, I'm Jessica Hyde. Come with me if you want to live."

As anti-heroes go, Jessica Hyde is one of the most savvy and complex: her daddy issues are up there with Tyrion's in *Game of Thrones*; like Rust Cohle in *True Detective*, she tends to drop conversational clangers. She is the central hook in a conspiracy thriller, which also stars grandees Stephen Rea, James Fox and Geraldine James. It was quite the coup for O'Shaughnessy to land the role, but it's not the first time she seemed to come out of nowhere to steal the prize.

Back in 2000, O'Shaughnessy was 24 and living in Dublin when the Gate Theatre announced it would be auditioning for Salomé, the lead role in Oscar Wilde's fruity telling of the biblical tale. O'Shaughnessy had spent her teen years living with her family in Reading,

England, having moved from Galway city aged nine. She became heavily involved in amateur and semi-professional dramatics, and trained in dance.

"Then I moved to Dublin and was lucky enough to get an audition for Salomé," recalls O'Shaughnessy. "I was very seriously put through my paces there. I absolutely loved it. That's just a ridiculous gift. Then the downside is that it's really hard to match it."

Since securing Salomé, O'Shaughnessy has rarely been out of work, becoming a fixture at the Gate, performing at the Abbey and in the West End. Despite her exquisite features and a seductive, whispery manner of speaking, most forays she made into film and television reaped poor dividends.

"*Utopia* was something I didn't expect. I spent all my time in the theatre. I wasn't interested in stepping out and, any time I did, I was kind of overwhelmed by the experience. I started writing with friends in Dublin, doing a little bit of comedy sketches, messing around. I told my agent that was the angle I wanted to travel. And then within a week of me saying that, he called with this audition."

The second season of *Utopia* begins on Channel 4 this week. The first series was a critical success with a cultish following — HBO is due to remake it, with David Fincher directing — but hugely controversial: violent scenes included a mass shooting in a school and the torture of a man that culminates in the spooning out of an eye. Written by Dennis Kelly, who grew

up in London to Irish parents, it is heavily indebted to popular culture, but also explores the moral quandaries of philosophies such as utilitarianism, which promotes the idea of the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

"[Dennis is a] lovely, totally down-to-earth person," says O'Shaughnessy. "You would never know that came from that. I said to him, 'What happened to you?' And he said, 'Nothing.'"

Kelly is not the only London-Irish writer with a flair for violence. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Martin McDonagh wrote a scene in which an adult daughter pushes her mother's hand into a flame. Casual violence also pervades *The Guard* and *Calvary*, written and directed by McDonagh's brother, John Michael.

"I often wonder about that actually," says O'Shaughnessy, who knows the McDonaghs. "I don't know what the answer is, but I certainly know that the London-Irish are a breed of very unique, sensitive, poetic but very edgy characters."

"I think it's because they grew up as outsiders. I had that experience coming to England. I played with those London-Irish kids. Growing up in the 1980s in England as an Irish kid, whether or not you had an accent, you're an outsider with a lot of edge. Even though you are welcomed into the community, you grow up with a sense of otherness."

There's nothing in O'Shaughnessy's resumé that prepares fans for her role as Jessica Hyde. Even Salomé, with her peculiar blood lust for John the Baptist's

head, isn't a match: Salomé is a classic femme fatale, after all, while Hyde is a new genus. She is a survivalist, she is being hunted by people who want to kill her, and, in turn, she kills with her own hands, in a sordid, squalid scene.

"Mark Munden [the director] was very helpful," says O'Shaughnessy. "He always angled for the colder, more remote, disconnected version of Jessica that there was. She's very economical with her energy and her conversation. And she doesn't trust anybody."

O'Shaughnessy displays little vanity in the role. Asked to beef up for the first series, she took up boxing; for the second season, her hair was shorn and bleached. Hyde is depicted in an almost non-gender fashion yet O'Shaughnessy's lissom

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Textual analysis O'Shaughnessy was largely a stage actress when she won the part in *Utopia*, which is back for season two

prettiness means you never forget that she is a woman. Her innate fragility adds a necessary dimension to a character that could end up in Tank Girl territory.


"It seems to me, from what I've gotten back from people, for a woman to go to those extremes is far less forgivable because she seemed to be making intellectual choices," O'Shaughnessy says. "That's very interesting to me and that's very exciting to play."

She laughs off the idea that she was able to plumb her own life experiences when portraying Jessica Hyde. "Obviously my life has not been in tandem with hers. Jessica has never been held. She's the loneliest person. She's never been schooled, never lived within four walls."

It can be no coincidence, however, that there is a similar mix of vulnerability and steeliness in O'Shaughnessy. She began acting because she was so unhappy having moved from Galway to Reading — "I felt like my freedom had been stolen from me" — while her current single status means her work is her life. "It can be lonely sometimes, but not too much. The percentage of loneliness is outweighed by the percentage of non-loneliness. My desire to be free to travel and work the way I want to work is greater than any other desire at this time."

Currently in Los Angeles doing industry meetings — no call from Fincher, so far — O'Shaughnessy says she has no big career plans following *Utopia*. As with Salomé, the chances of finding and winning a role such as Jessica Hyde are unlikely to come around too often.

"I still think about [Salomé]; I'm still in awe of that period of my life. It was still so innocent — I just didn't know how hard life and this business can be. With *Utopia*, I was complicating everything: 'If I don't get this, I don't want to be disappointed.' There was probably apprehension as well because there's no balcony dress in sight: 'I won't get away with anything here. So I have to dive in and let it strip me bare and rebuild me.' Ugh."

"If something is a right fit, that just happens. The effort that you put into getting a job all happens way before you've ever done the audition. I remember thinking that with Salomé as well. With Jessica, for the audition, she kind of happened to me: I went in and they employed me." 

The second series of Utopia begins on Channel 4 tomorrow

ANTHONY WOODS

